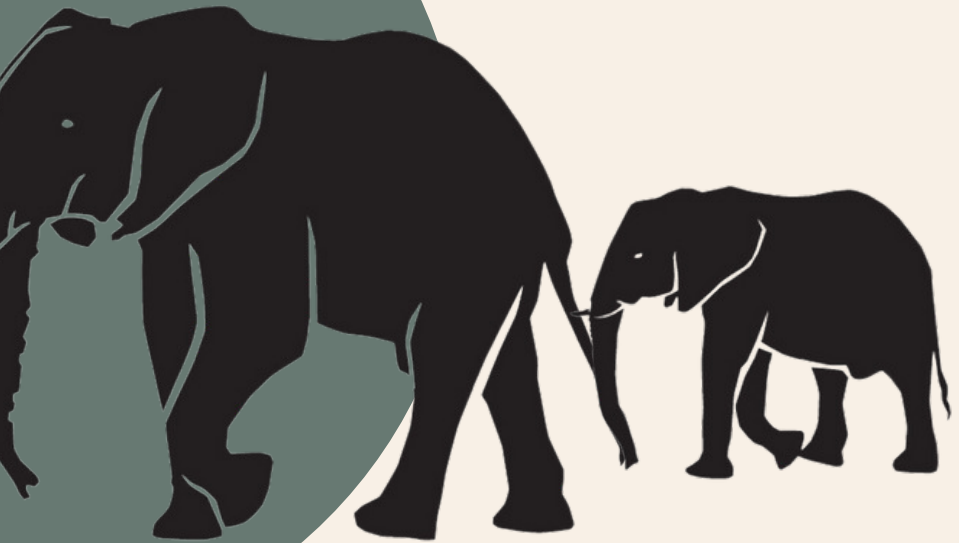


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# security culture



building  
relationships of  
trust and care

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First Print 2023

Bde Ota Otunwe, Mni Sota Makoce, aka “Minneapolis, Minnesota,” occupied Dakota homeland and Anishinaabe territory.

Printed/read on \_\_\_\_\_ Land.

*As you fill in the space above with a land acknowledgement, we encourage you to add meaning to this practice by accompanying it with a lifelong commitment to organizing for Landback and reparations, as well as the abolition of borders, prisons, police, and all other vestiges of settler colonialism and racial capitalism.*

*Written by Kira Kelley*

Zine design, cover illustration, interior illustrations, and elephant text, Kinship, and revisions by Kourtney Dunning

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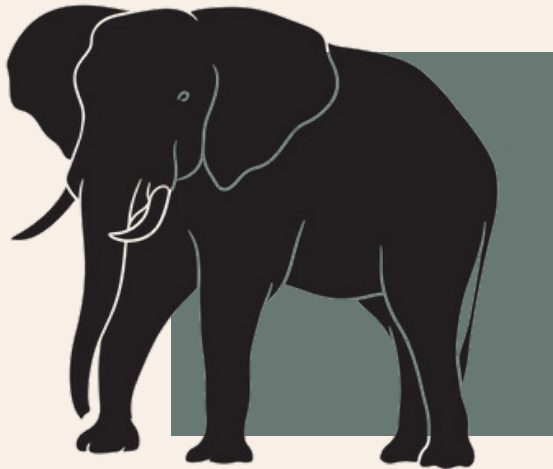


**CLIMATE DEFENSE**  
PROJECT

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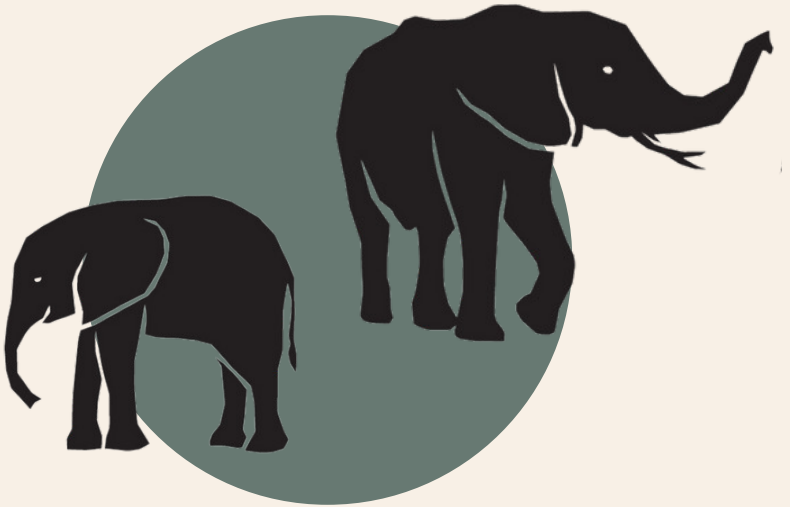
*see a link? click it! Or go to the resources page for a QR code to all featured links.*



**se·cu·ri·ty cul·ture***noun*

1. *the practices we develop with our communities so that we do not subject ourselves or each other to risks without consent.*

*Elephant herds exhibit some of the best examples of teamwork in the animal kingdom.*



*Elephants have a good memory and are among the world's smartest animals. They offer an extraordinary model for keeping communities equipped and powerful.*

# introduction

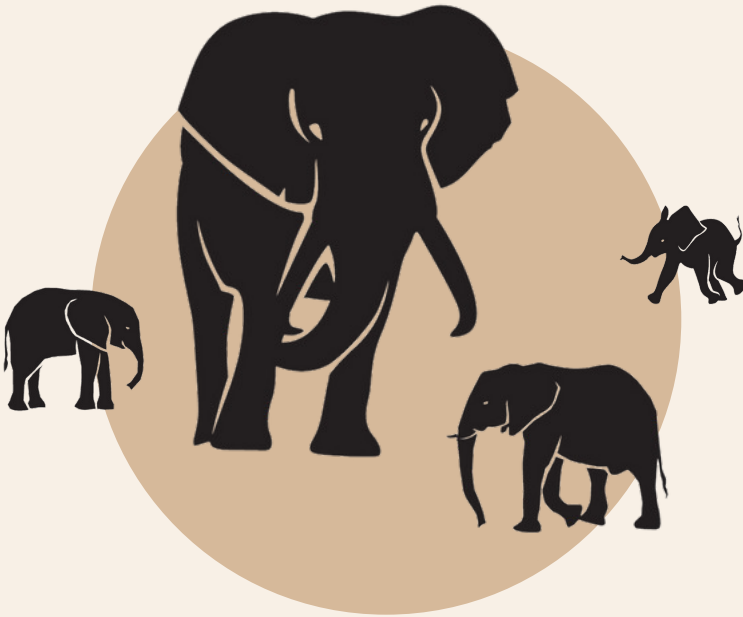
One way to define security culture is: *developing practices with our communities so that we do not subject ourselves or each other to risks without consent.*

Some of these risks come from the corporate state, such as criminal charges and civil SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation). Risks can also include the ways we inadvertently get in our own way. A well-meaning comrade with internalized oppressive behaviors can disrupt a movement just as well as a plant.

If you don't want to read this whole blog, the most important takeaway can be summed up by this reflection that someone offered at a recent training:

**"the best thing we can be doing right now to keep each other safe is to be getting to know each other; to be building relationships of trust and care."**

*Elephant groups are matriarchal; grandmothers and mother lead in the cultural development of the herd. Like elephants, Elders in our social movements carry knowledge of culture that is precious to our continued survival.*



*From years of experience, elephant leaders know how to source medicinal plants, where to find food and water during drought, and the predator realms to avoid. Similarly, maintaining our languages and life ways in the face of colonialism requires generational learning and a commitment to security culture practices.*

# we keep us safe

Curiosity and compassion can feel frivolous or unfamiliar when state repression is everywhere and we are socialized to consider vulnerability as weakness.<sup>1</sup> But just as the abolitionist adage “we keep us safe” reminds us that safety comes from community, not police, we must also reject police and prison logic as pathways to security in our movements.

My heart breaks when I see security culture used as a pretext for shutting people out, separating the personal from the political, reading danger into our differences, disposing of each other for perceived imperfections, and generally undermining our own movements in the exact ways that security culture is supposed to guard against.

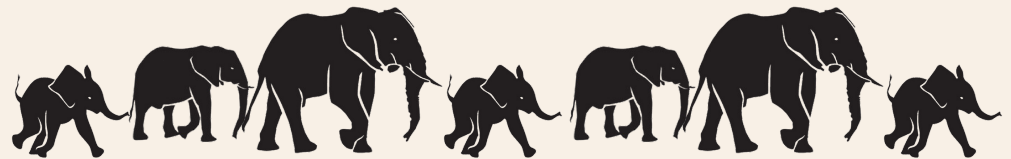
**White supremacy culture, ableism, and toxic masculinity don't need to hitch a ride on an undercover agent to infiltrate our movements.**

<sup>1</sup> For more about the transformative power of vulnerability, check out our friends at the [Fierce Vulnerability Network!](#)

We do unpaid labor for the state when we divide ourselves with rigid but implicit rules predicated on the baseline assumption that we are all perilous to each other until proven otherwise.

The caveat to this is that inherent worth does not encompass inherent trustworthiness. Sharing secrets is not a sign of respect or a shortcut for closeness. Giving sensitive information to new members makes a group inaccessible to those who have a lower capacity to take risks or need time to build trust.

Security culture involves a mix of gut feelings and earned trust, which can be powerful tools as long as we are mindful of the ways that anti-Blackness, xenophobia, racism, ableism, toxic masculinity, and transphobia can corrupt our gut and influence our willingness and entitlement to trust.

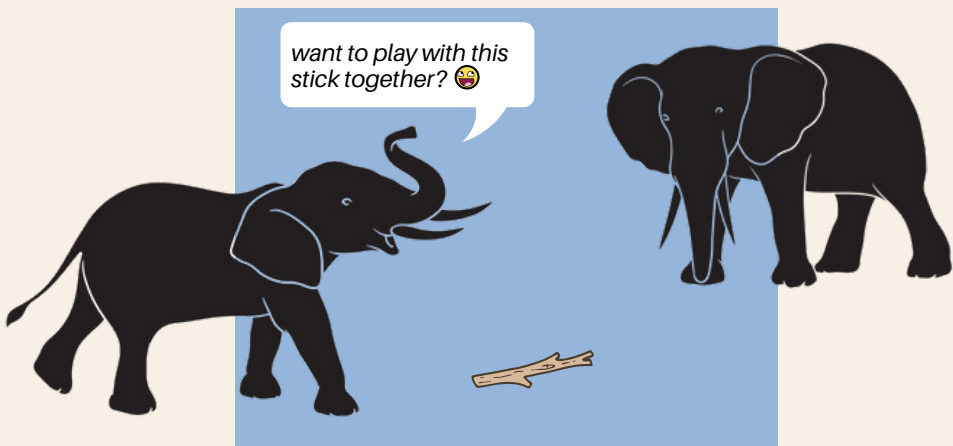


*Elephants walk in a line for safety*



White, wealthy, gender conforming, and/or “conventionally attractive” people are often conditioned to expect a certain level of immediate trust and to distrust people who they do not understand. For those of us with any of these identities, we improve our group’s security culture when we work to notice and then reject our impulses to be offended when we are not immediately met with warmth or familiarity in new relationships.

*Elephants build relationships with one another through a close social network of bonding via work and play.*



*Building relationships takes time.*

**WE INTERRUPT THE REGULARLY  
SCHEDULED PROGRAM TO BRING YOU  
THIS IMPORTANT MESSAGE:**



Kinship is an Indigenous value system generally based in our responsibility toward ourselves, our community, the land, water, animal kin, including animate and inanimate beings, and so on. Kinship is how we build and maintain balanced relationships with our environment through vulnerability, trust, and reciprocity.

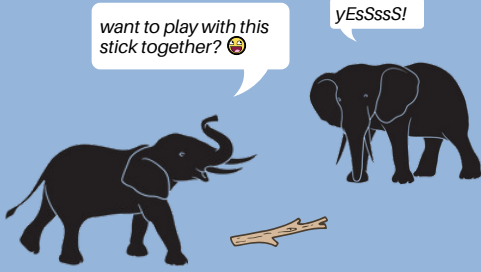
So why is kinship relevant to security culture? Kinship is an awareness of the way our relationships impact our environment. Many of us are in this work to protect our environment but we might not carry the tools to treat our relationships with the intention and opportunity required to build and sustain lasting change in our communities. Our cultures are fragmented and fragile without relationships. And without relationships we are more easily divided and conquered. Kinship requires that we practice the values of vulnerability, trust, and reciprocity. Under the current colonial occupation, and with the baggage of historical and generational trauma, we as a collective struggle to lean into the values of kinship. *But kinship is the root of secure social movements.*

The next page features a simplified comic of what this could look like in our day to day interactions.

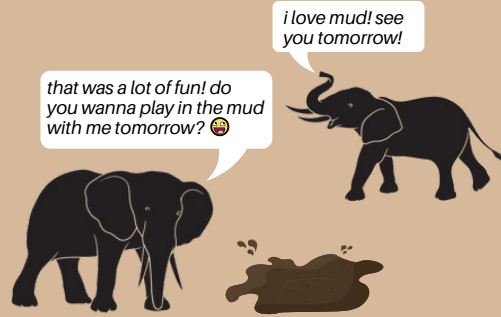
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*There are thousands of sovereign Indigenous nations on this planet, all of which have differing and varying ways of understanding and practicing culture. Kinship philosophies will vary depending on who you speak to and should never be projected upon Native peoples as a one size fits all.*

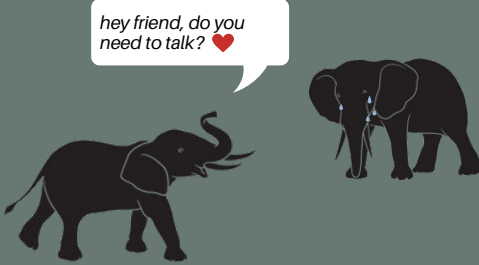
*Relationships are built through a willingness to be vulnerable with one another.*



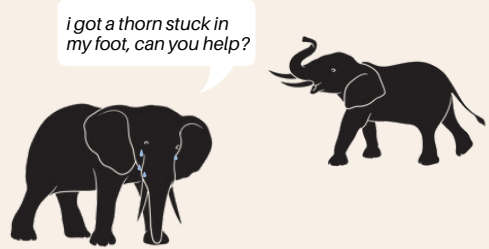
*Reciprocal vulnerability allows us to build bonds out of trust.*



*Trust over time facilitates inter-dependence.*



*Interdependence allows us to lean on one another with care and reciprocity.*



*When we practice vulnerability, trust, and reciprocity, then we will have achieved kinship.*



*Kinship is the root of secure social movements.*



# critical thinking > rules

I like to start with a “threat model.” With any given situation, I try to identify the most likely and/or most severe risks to people and goals. Once I identify those risks, I ask myself how I can mitigate their severity and likelihood, and how I can make sure people who are assuming these risks can give informed consent.

One reason I caution against a rigid application of memorized rules is that each project and every person has different security needs. Uniformity can backfire. Obviously, people planning a mass action will have vastly different security protocols than a small affinity group planning an action they don't plan to take credit for. Similarly, people who are undocumented, on food stamps, on parole or probation, or have precarious jobs they could be fired from based on political activity may need to be private about certain projects or people they are associated with. The group needs to tighten their practices to meet people with greater security culture needs where they are at.

## examples

If one person in a group needs to stay off of social media, this doesn't mean "nobody should have social media!" Ask yourself: "Does this picture place my friend who is out on a "good behavior" bail condition at this action?" (ie because I've posted indirectly about this friend, because their car is in this photo, etc).

If one person has tighter tech security needs than the rest of the group, the rest of the group could text, email, and take electronic notes about the shared project so long as they are careful to avoid referencing that person in any electronic records.



*Elephant units have an unusually large communication network with fluid social systems, long-range signaling capacities and the mental capacity for extensive social recognition.*

We also want to adjust practices so that we are not encumbering ourselves to hide benign, already public, or otherwise protected information.

Jitsi is great for small group meetings when used on a secure server, because it is free and end to end encrypted. However, Jitsi is less accessible in other ways and harder to build relationships on, due to constant audio glitches and cameras not staying on. Zoom does not have the same reputation for security, but it is in fact also end to end encrypted. Zoom has distinct pros and cons. It has subtitle capability, is an easier platform for less tech savvy people, and allows for visual and nonverbal communication. However, Zoom supports Israel's ongoing genocide and land theft in Palestine.

**Both Zoom and Jitsi lose encryption when a participant uses the dial-in feature.**

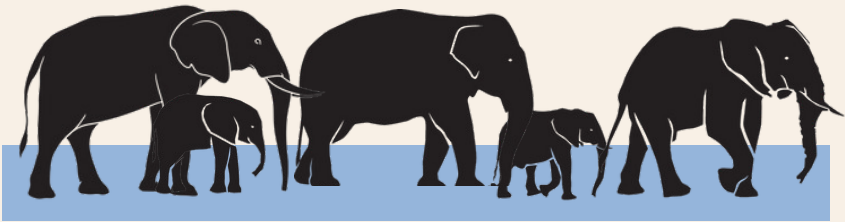
## examples

A “camp name” provides an alternate persona, disconnected from someone’s everyday or legal persona, that minimizes exposure to legal risk when adopted temporarily. But overusing this tactic confuses comrades more easily than the government agents with infinite time, money, and data to research us. By using a rotating camp name as your default persona, you become harder for movement folks to build familiarity with, to vouch for in new spaces, or to hold accountable for harms you’ve committed under different names. Plus, camp names lose all value as soon as you connect them to your legal or everyday persona, such as by using a camp name when discussing your open court case, or updating your camp name on Signal every few days next to your easily traceable phone number. Ultimately, we take the biggest risk of all by making it more difficult to get to know the people we organize with. It is unsafe to take serious legal and/or physical risks with someone you know only as Pumpkin Emoji. -->



Big group organizing threads are best suited for lawful conversations about non-arrestable activity. Being open about who we are makes those threads safer for everyone.

This is not to say that we should all be using Zoom, not Jitsi, or that camp names are pointless. But we can do better than to abandon critical thinking in favor of oversimplified rules like “Jitsi is more secure” or “camp names keep us safe.” The rituals we perform to assuage our fear have consequences, which we put ourselves in danger by ignoring.



*Baby elephants need more security when crossing rivers. Elder elephants use their bodies as a support to prevent the current from sweeping calves away.*

# relationship based security

When evaluating the efficacy of security culture practices, a pivotal and often overlooked factor is how they affect our opportunities to connect and build relationships.

To the extent that you can be open about who you are, what you are doing, or what groups you are a part of, consider taking advantage of that privilege. *When we disguise ourselves in a group because we are afraid that others in the group are misrepresenting their own identities and motives, we sacrifice the relationship-based security that benefits everyone in favor of achieving a false sense of personal safety.*

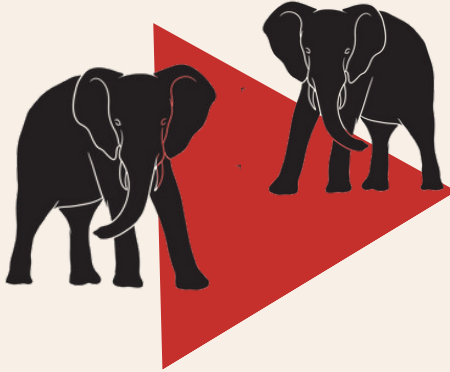
We can reject this individualism by discerning what information is risky to share and what information is benign or already compromised. Risky information to share includes anything unlawful, (or that someone could argue is unlawful, because cops like to arrest people first

and make reasons up later). Unless you are confident that everything you are saying is already out in the open, avoid discussing or questioning others about activities that you have not been arrested for but could have been, your involvement with other people's past unlawful activity, or future risky actions in any stage of planning. Sharing this information should be on a strict "need to know" basis.

One way to evaluate which people and what information fall under the "need to know" category of information about unlawful activities is to think about the concept of *informed consent*.

If someone is driving with a revoked license, they may not want to shout from the rooftops that they are breaking the law every time they drive. But, good security culture means they disclose their revoked license to potential passengers to ensure that people are consenting to the risk of an extensive police interaction by accepting a ride.

*"When two elephants fight, it is the grass that is trampled"*



*Our interactions impact our movement ecosystem.*

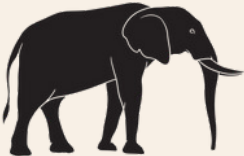
I often see the “need to know” principle being overextended in ways that backfire, such as when people have not thought through “what information is sensitive and what information isn’t” so they err on the side of sharing nothing. But, the myriad of conflicts that inevitably arise in movement spaces can much more easily destabilize relationships that lack a baseline of connection. Erring on the side of caution, especially with information that implicates other people, is certainly a good thing.

**And also, we can’t build a movement out of strangers.**

# vouching, vetting, & snitchjacketing

Vetting and vouching can be efficient ways to expand circles of trust. *Vetting* is researching someone that you do not know, to learn more about them than just what they have already revealed to you. *Vouching* for someone is when people extend their trust for you over a person who you promise is also trustworthy.

**I try to be really specific about the basis and extent of my vouch.**



*"I have known this person since we were children, they are deeply kind, and I would bet my life they are not a narc"*

**is a different vouch than**

*"I met this person six months ago, I like them a lot, I do not know much about their past but over the course of regular meetings I have realized that our politics are aligned and I have not seen any red flags."*

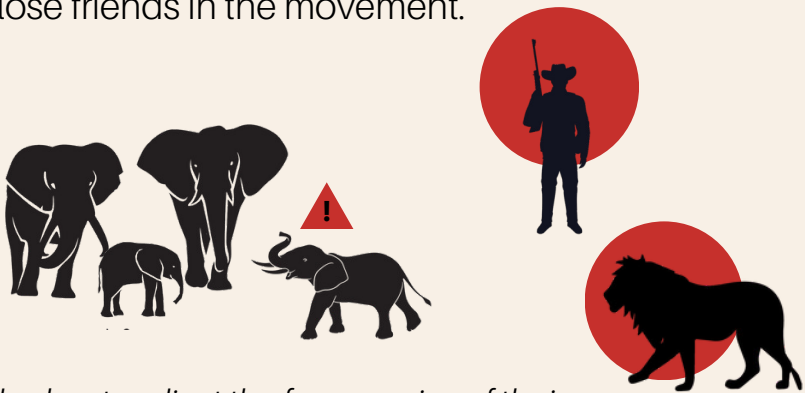


Specificity is also key when sharing concerns. Calling someone “untrustworthy” does not give other people the information they might need to decide the safe extent of their own contact, and instead invites people to make assumptions, spread rumors, and kick people out of a community altogether. If someone has a pattern of getting activated and escalating with police in a way that violates action agreements, I would not say “oh, they are dangerous.” I would say exactly what their pattern of harm is and suggest that they be invited to hold off-site action roles unless and until they can change that pattern.

Concerns might be more serious, too, such as that someone is undercover and reporting back to state or federal law enforcement. If you think someone is a narc, carefully trying to confirm or disprove your suspicions is key to avoid *snitchjacketing* (accusing someone of being an undercover without having proof).

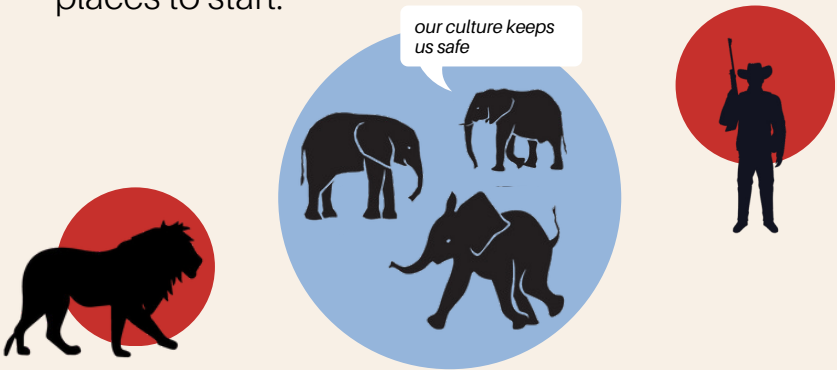
**If you have concerns about someone, listen to your gut. Ask yourself why exactly you are uneasy.**

Warning signs that a person is an undercover include when a person: has unexplained access to a lot of money and expensive or hard-to-obtain things, is new to movement strategy but pushy about doing risky/illegal actions, or has an inconsistent or gap-filled backstory. Some flags depend on whether someone is a former activist who got flipped or a long-time government agent posing as an activist. For example, people informing pursuant to cooperating plea deals (i.e., got serious charges that they resolved by agreeing to become a snitch) may be more likely than FBI agents to have family members and close friends in the movement.



*Elephants adjust the frequencies of their vocalizations as they meet different threats. They make unique calls when they come across swarming bees and a different unique call when they meet people who traditionally hunted them.*

Importantly, some of these signs can also be benign byproducts of that person's own security culture or unique safety needs—for example, while federal agents often choose new names for themselves and generally don't involve family members in their cover story, queer and trans people may also not have contact with their families of origin and may also want privacy about what's on their drivers license or what name they may once have been called. There is no one right way to go about identifying or responding to infiltrators, but communication and relationship building are always good places to start.



*Both poaching and climate change have caused a breakdown in the herd structure of elephants. But the sharing of skills and deep commitment to herd culture makes elephants one of the most network resilient and secure animal kingdoms.*



# communication is key

## Clear communication is foundational to strong security culture

Security culture practices should be explicit (e.g., “new people need two vouches to join this Signal thread; we do not talk about these things around phones; this person consents to being on social media but this person doesn’t”). This is useful for several reasons:

### Explicit Practices

- (1) are easier to discuss, refine, and abandon if needed;
- (2) allow for greater accountability when violated;
- (3) make movements more accessible to people who aren’t in the “in crowd,” or whose neurodiversities make implicit conversation harder to discern.

Practices should also be applied universally.

Informants try to take advantage of double standards and exceptions for people who are in this “in crowd,” which is why informants so often date or hook up with the people they are surveilling.

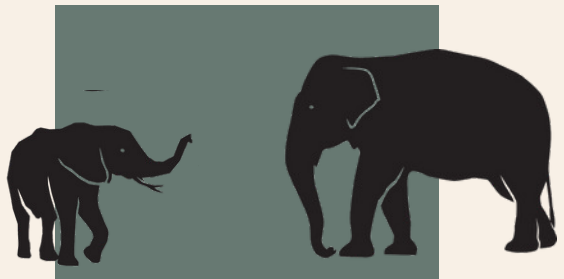
Communication is important both when we talk to each other, and about each other. In a dream world scenario, we have deep relationships of trust and care so that exchanging feedback is easy. In real life, feedback is SO FREAKING HARD. This means being gentle with ourselves and each other for daring to engage in a practice that white supremacy and toxic masculinity program us to avoid.

These same cultural forces tell us that our worth is contingent on being perfect, being productive, being an expert, and so on: that we have to prove we are indispensable, otherwise someone will realize we have flaws and dispose of us. When we are up against systems as seemingly omnipotent as racial capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism, and our progress is intangible and impossible to quantify, one of the easiest ways to

feel powerful is to point out others' mistakes to show everyone that we are useful or more knowledgeable than someone else. The goal of giving feedback should never be to build our individual social power over others in the group. "Why am I doing this" is a question only you can answer, as the person giving feedback.

Instituting norms in which we offer feedback from a place of humility and good faith also strengthens the corresponding obligation that we all have, especially those of us in positions of relative power or privilege, to embrace feedback regardless of its delivery and to engage fully with the substance without first critiquing the process or presuming a motive.

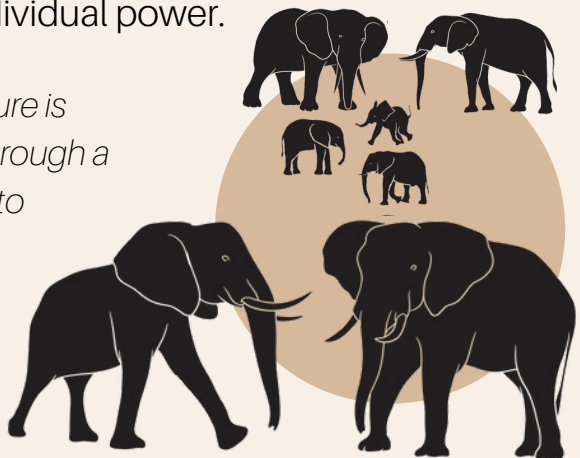
*Elephant elders do not keep information to themselves, they impart it to others so that the future of the herd is protected.*



*The purpose of feedback is to open space for understanding, resolution, and transformation so that our movements may have balance and longevity.*

Modeling the giving and receiving of feedback, handling mistakes while remaining grounded in shared values, and learning how to be better together builds security in a group. It sets the tone that owning up to our mistakes is a better option than trying to hide them. If you own up to a mistake out of a shared desire to keep the group safe rather than act from a fear of being canceled, you're much more likely to notify the group of your mistake and help make plans for the necessary damage control. Owning up to mistakes is terrifying, but we make this easier for everyone when we show a commitment to hold firmly to shared values, to replace ego-based motivations with the assuredness of inherent worth, and to see conflict as opportunities to grow through struggle rather than to vie for or maintain individual power.

*Elephant culture is maintained through a commitment to model and learn from one another.*



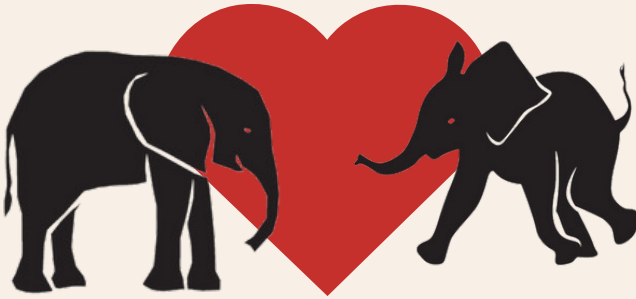
# conclusion

We cannot derive security from the repressive matrix our movements are formed in and fighting against. We cannot shake off the racial capitalist, settler colonial, cis hetero patriarchal empire by replicating its culture within ourselves.

Security comes from our culture, not from our adherence to a rigid set of norms or rules. This requires us to commit to the dynamic process of unlearning the dominant culture and growing a new one up from under it.

Creating nurturance culture to override a backdrop of fear, control, and scarcity, can work literal magic in any movement space. By sharing more appreciations for everyone, lifting up the labor that society teaches us to take for granted, sharing excitement grounded in connection, loving ourselves and each other through our mistakes, and embracing accountability, we redirect the pressures on our group that coerce us to punch sideways rather than up.

Thank you for engaging with this. The downside to a zine is that it's more of a rant than a conversation, so please consider this only as a starting point! Now is as good of a time as ever to get with your affinity group to talk through this—after intentionally weighing the pros and cons of virtual meeting platforms, the feasibility of meeting in person, and COVID-19 safety concerns! 😊



*If you are reading this zine in print and would like quick access to the clickable links throughout the zine or the elephant resources please use this QR code.*

# about the artist



Kourtney Dunning (They/Them) is an artist, abolitionist, and grassroots organizer ancestrally based and born out of the South West. They have been a strategic movement

communicator since 2013. As a self taught artist with a background in political historiography they use visual messaging and education to translate complex concepts into accessible sources of knowledge from which community can build power. When they aren't developing digital communications strategies, copywriting for the movement, and designing art they can be found behind the megaphone, coordinating direct action, and throwing down in the kitchen. They are an avid science fiction reader, cloud watcher, and astral plane traveler following in the footsteps of their resistant rich Tigua lineage.

**check out their portfolio**  
<https://bit.ly/KMakesArt>

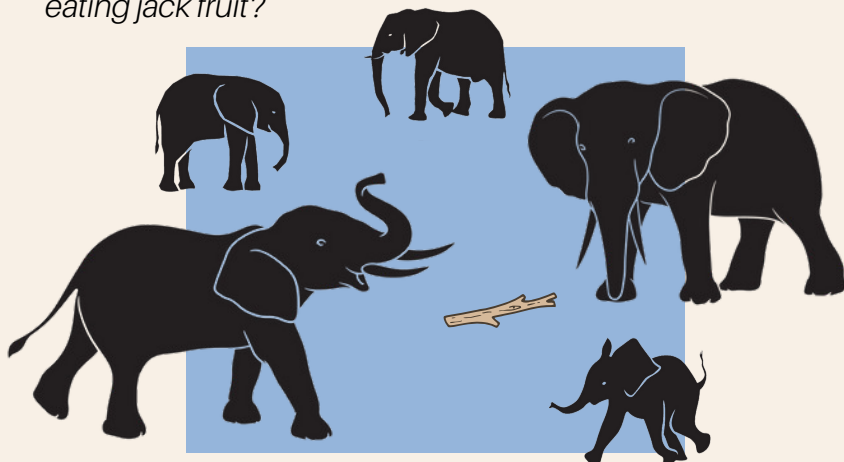
**Venmo them**  
**@KourtneyKarkashian**



# zine links and more

- Page 4 [Fierce Vulnerability Network](https://thefvn.org)  
<https://thefvn.org>
- Page 8 [Kinship](https://bit.ly/KinshipEcology)  
<https://bit.ly/KinshipEcology>
- Page 12 [End to end encrypted](https://proton.me/blog/what-is-end-to-end-encryption)  
<https://proton.me/blog/what-is-end-to-end-encryption>
- Page 21 [Network Resilience](https://bit.ly/44o10CK)  
<https://bit.ly/44o10CK>
- Page 23 [Exchanging feedback](https://medium.com/@brookeanderson/10-tips-on-receiving-critical-feedback-a-guide-for-activists-e51689c59d81)  
<https://medium.com/@brookeanderson/10-tips-on-receiving-critical-feedback-a-guide-for-activists-e51689c59d81>
- [Moving Toward Liberatory Futures Through Conflict](https://www.idha-nyc.org/holding-difference)  
<https://www.idha-nyc.org/holding-difference>

*Did you know that elephants  
love playing with sticks and  
eating jack fruit?*





# elephant resources

[The magic of the Elephant's river crossing](https://www.zambezi grande.com/uncategorized/the-magic-of-the-elephants-river-crossing/)

<https://www.zambezi grande.com/uncategorized/the-magic-of-the-elephants-river-crossing/>

[Elephant Ethogram Tables](https://www.elephantvoices.org/elephant-ethogram/ethogram-table/overview.html)

<https://www.elephantvoices.org/elephant-ethogram/ethogram-table/overview.html>

[How Elephants Communicate](https://www.elephantvoices.org/elephant-communication.html)

<https://www.elephantvoices.org/elephant-communication.html>

[Animals That Work Together In Nature](https://teambuilding.com/blog/animal-team-building)

<https://teambuilding.com/blog/animal-team-building>

[Elephants Recognize the Voice of their Enemies](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/elephants-recognize-the-voices-of-their-enemies/)

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/elephants-recognize-the-voices-of-their-enemies/>

[Vertical Transmission of Social Roles Drives Resilience](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(15)01366-4)

[https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(15\)01366-4](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(15)01366-4)

[Elephants Rearrange Family Structure in Response to Poaching](https://www.zmescience.com/research/elephants-family-poaching-27352342/)

<https://www.zmescience.com/research/elephants-family-poaching-27352342/>

[The Darker Side of Elephant Country](https://archive.nytimes.com/scientistatwork.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/27/the-darker-side-of-elephant-country/)

<https://archive.nytimes.com/scientistatwork.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/27/the-darker-side-of-elephant-country/>

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The color palette for this zine is pulled from the landscape of the Savanna grasslands in Kenya. With the QR Code below you can view the image that drew inspiration

